

ICTs Come to the Rainbow Nation

Information technology as tools for development in South Africa

Sizwe Ngcobo was a 16-year-old, Zulu-speaking, special-needs student attending a school for the mentally disabled in South Africa when he first saw a computer. A year later, he gained international recognition for artwork he contributed to a collaborative student-designed Web site. He earned a silver medal in an annual Internet competition co-sponsored by SchoolNet South Africa, a project initiated and supported by IDRC.

SchoolNet SA is part of a broader SchoolNet Africa initiative, which involves projects in more than 20 countries. Through its Acacia Program Initiative: Communities and the Information Society in Africa, IDRC provides core funding for the organization.

South Africa is often described as the “Rainbow Nation” because of the diversity of its people and landscapes. “It is a term of hope, yet the country’s divisive past will continue to affect it for many decades,” predicts Dr Zenda Ofir, who evaluated how Acacia South Africa projects have influenced policy in the country. The evaluation was part of a broad study launched by the International Development Research Centre’s (IDRC) Evaluation Unit in 2001 to determine if and how IDRC-supported research has influenced public policy. “The goal of racial harmony remains somewhat elusive. Many people are still learning to live with newfound freedoms. The protection of human rights remains a major concern in a society in the throes of transition and faced with serious problems of unemployment, poverty, crime, and HIV/AIDS.”

The country’s income disparities are among the most extreme in the world, with 13% of the population living in “First World” conditions and 53% in the “Third World.” Of the “Third Worlders,” only 25% have access to electricity and running water, only half have primary school education, and more than a third of the children suffer from chronic malnutrition. More than 20% of the population is HIV-positive.

Despite this, South Africa’s economy remains dominant in Africa. Its infrastructure, both in size and sophistication, dwarfs that of other African nations. Modern financial and industrial sectors are supported by highly developed systems of telecommunications, road, rail, air, and electric power grids.

The transition to democracy

South Africa’s transition from an authoritarian apartheid rule to democracy in the mid-1990s meant that new governance systems and policy frameworks had to be created. The policy environment had to reflect a new set of values – transparency, participation in decision-making processes, and commitment to the development of the majority of South Africans neglected and oppressed by the past regime, Dr Ofir notes.

She adds: “Nowhere was this need more urgent than in the communication and information arena: one of the most important priorities was the transformation of the public sector decision-making environment. With the implementation of the new government’s Reconstruction and Development Plan, effective communication and information systems were necessary to support planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation activities. [...] The new Government of National Unity was faced with the need to balance the desperate needs of the poor majority with those of a modern economy competing in a highly competitive global arena.”

This helped to open a policy window for information communications technologies (ICTs) policy renewal during the transition period.



IDRC's history in South Africa

IDRC was active in supporting South Africa's transition to democracy during the 1990s. Prior to this, it had been funding the activities of South African exiles in neighbouring countries and had worked with many of the emerging leaders, building a relationship of trust. Between 1988 and 1994, when the imminent demise of apartheid was becoming apparent, the Centre changed its approach by funding projects in South Africa.

As one of the first international agencies to establish an office in South Africa (in 1992) during the transition, and one of the first to focus on the use of ICTs for development, IDRC's priorities were in synergy with those of the new government, Dr Ofir points out. Common issues included information sector reform, policy research capacity-building, and a focus on the previously disadvantaged.

ICTs and their use for development had been a key area on the agenda of the African National Congress (ANC) in its exile years. In 1994, the ANC election manifesto for South Africa's first democratic elections already contained statements about the importance of ICTs and their use for development.

After the 1994 elections, IDRC involvement continued with a new strategy that focused on four broad themes. One of these was access to information and information technologies. IDRC supported several policy reform processes, each resulting in government Green and White Papers and new legislation passed by the South African Parliament.

The decision to develop a National Information and Communication Program (NICP) for South Africa was taken by IDRC after two missions to the country. The NICP goal was to advise and assist the new government in "conceptualizing, designing, and implementing information programs, systems, and policies in support of its development goals." It was to support a number of different initiatives and activities that would together constitute a national information and communications program.

In line with the IDRC focus on support for policy processes rather than for influencing policy content, the NICP was established as a major initiative to support the new government's efforts at creating an enabling policy environment, according to Dr Ofir. "This project is perceived as one of the IDRC's most

successful contributions to the ICT policy arena in South Africa," adds Dr Ofir.

"Mechanisms and activities that contributed to its policy influence included the appointment of knowledgeable and respected key IDRC advisers and staff who could provide technical expertise where required; the support of research studies that raised policy issues and informed policy process; the support and facilitation of, and participation in, policy formulation process; and the support and facilitation of meetings and forums where policymakers and representatives of various sectors could meet to discuss policy issues."

Acacia in South Africa

The idea of Acacia emerged at the 1996 *Information Society and Development Conference* held in South Africa. Acacia SA's goal was community empowerment. It was to aim for stronger community voices in political dialogue, increased capacity to solve community problems and reduce community tensions, extended access to basic services including education and health, and promotion of income-generating opportunities.

After 1997, most of IDRC's ICT-related projects were conducted under the Acacia program. Key areas identified were the development of multipurpose telecentres to support the growth of community markets, and the extension of the telecentres to address specific development problems. Projects were also carried out in three other main areas: policy, education/schools, and gender.

The South African Acacia Advisory Committee (SAAAC) and its secretariat were launched in 1999 to assist Acacia in defining and reviewing its direction in South Africa. It would disseminate lessons learned in Acacia, and coordinate national ICT-related development activities. However, it decided not to pursue the issue of an overarching information society policy. Rather, it would review policy and relevant implementation activities.

Dr Ofir describes the South African ICT environment as complex. "With the strong private, organized labour, and civil society sectors, many agendas have to be considered and balanced."

She adds: "It is therefore now far more difficult than in the early years for one party to play a leading role on policy formulation activities in the ICT sectors. Many more platforms and umbrella organizations exist in the private and NGO sectors,



for example. Alliances are formed and pressure on processes exerted from many different quarters. The relevant government departments are usually the drivers of policy processes and do not [now] make use of external agencies...”

She notes that the SAAAC was set up to represent the key sectors and focus on community interests and universal service. If the SAAAC was to influence policy, it would have had to have very strong leadership, a clear vision of its possible role in policy initiatives, and a strategy to fulfill that role. Members would also have had to be well-positioned, vocal, and respected among policy-makers for their policy expertise. According to Dr Ofir, “The key informants were of the opinion that to a lesser or greater extent these elements were missing from the work of the SAAAC.”

The SAAAC was thus not prominently placed in the ICT policy arena.

The SAAAC was also affected by the strategic review of the impact of Acacia and the IDRC Regional Office, which curtailed some Acacia activities. There was tension, observes Dr Ofir, between Committee members’ belief in a more grass-roots focus and IDRC’s promotion of a role in high-level advocacy and assistance with planning. She adds: “The Committee had been constituted to be representative of relevant sectors of society; not all members were recognized as ICT (policy) experts and this contributed to the perception that the SAAAC ‘was just another committee linked to a donor initiative,’ rather than a pool of ICT expertise available to government.”

Findings

Dr Ofir acknowledged that South Africa’s transition and later changes in policy approaches and processes meant that IDRC could have significant policy influence during the early 1990s, but far less during the latter part of the decade. “With few exceptions, the key informants in this study were of the opinion that the most significant IDRC contribution in the policy arena in the field of information and telecommunications in South Africa came about through the organization’s activities in the period before the existence of Acacia,” says Dr Ofir.

Two key factors influencing IDRC’s high profile during the period were the long-standing relationship between the Centre and the Democratic Movement, and the close relationship

between key IDRC officials and government decision-makers. This period was also seen as exciting and significant in terms of both policy formulation processes and content development. The IDRC focus on the support of such initiatives provided scope for pioneering interventions that could set the tone for policy formulation processes during the crucial first years of the democratic government.

Ofir notes that over the past decade, IDRC has been a leading voice on gender and ICTs for development in Africa, promoting gender-sensitive approaches to policies and projects. It has also supported a number of women’s projects, mainly through Acacia. During the past decade, at least three of the key officials in IDRC’s regional office in South Africa have been highly respected women who provide excellent role models in South Africa’s male-dominated ICT field.

However, Ofir is critical of the SAAAC’s apparent lack of attention to gender-focused and gender-sensitive projects. She suggests that IDRC could play an important role in creating awareness and in improving understanding of the gender dimensions of development policies and projects.

Dr Ofir also points to the need to develop a sustained base of policy research expertise in South Africa by providing, among other things, secure long-term financial support to research centres to conduct “longitudinal, comparative long-term research studies in order to assess whether policy models have failed or succeeded, and the factors influencing these successes or failures.”

IDRC’s emphasis was on process, and on building consensus within that process, rather than on influencing a particular outcome through a specific piece of research, she states. However, IDRC is credited for having promoted the concept of universal services in various ways during that critical policy-making period. “This helped to bring about a strong focus on universal service in the Telecommunications White Paper published in 1996, the establishment of the Universal Service Agency, and national telecentre and Multipurpose Community Centre Programs,” she says.

In South Africa, with its strong focus on racial equality, care has to be taken to ensure that processes, policies, and outcomes are sensitive to issues of gender and that implementation reflects this clearly, Dr Ofir suggests. “The NTPP [National Telecommunications Policy Project] consultative process included representatives from labour, the



disabled, and women's organizations. Even though the government representatives and various committees assisting in the drafting process of the Telecommunications White Paper were overwhelmingly male, the national focus on the previously disadvantaged ensured that the policy

reflected this priority quite strongly. Although it is not an engendered policy, the redress of existing imbalances is a major theme of the document and is most strongly reflected in the establishment of the Universal Service Agency."



Evaluating IDRC's influence on ICT policy

IDRC was one of the first organizations to recognize and address ICTs as a priority area for African development. It was also one of the only international agencies prepared to allocate funding toward establishing ICTs on the African continent in the 1990s. Acacia's first five-year phase, approved by IDRC in 1997, promoted ICTs for community development, especially among the poor and disadvantaged. The importance of policy frameworks linked to research was acknowledged, as well as the need for demonstration models that could inform public policy initiatives. Over the years, Acacia has invested more than CA \$40 million in research, demonstration, and evaluation projects on key ICT issues (www.idrc.ca/acacia).

In 2001, IDRC undertook an evaluation of the public policy influence of some of the research it supported, including the Acacia Program in Uganda, Senegal, Mozambique, and South Africa. In all four countries, political stability and a government committed to modernization and searching for effective new development methods provided opportunities for policy influence.

All the governments were relatively new, with most having come to power after long periods of turmoil and instability. They were thus actively seeking solutions to the development needs of their people, using among others, donor support to achieve their objectives. Key government officials, including ministers, were aware — or being made aware — of the opportunities presented by ICTs.

The early emphasis on feasibility and background research studies as well as the establishment of pilot projects, laid the groundwork for an integrated, multipronged approach to the Acacia strategies in each country. The approaches were similar and provided significant policy influence potential.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is a Canadian public corporation, created to help developing countries find solutions to the social, economic, and natural resource problems they face. Support is directed to building an indigenous research capacity. Because influencing the policy process is an important aspect of IDRC's work, in 2001 the Evaluation Unit launched a strategic evaluation of more than 60 projects in some 20 countries to examine whether and how the research it supports influences public policy and decision-making. The evaluation design and studies can be found at: www.idrc.ca/evaluation/policy